



Messiah University  
**Mosaic**

---

## Honors Projects and Presentations: Undergraduate

---

5-12-2012

# Reading the Leaves: Tea and American Colonial Identity, 1765-1775

Amanda Mylin

Follow this and additional works at: <https://mosaic.messiah.edu/honors>



Part of the [International Business Commons](#), and the [United States History Commons](#)

Permanent URL: <https://mosaic.messiah.edu/honors/142>

---

### Recommended Citation

Mylin, Amanda, "Reading the Leaves: Tea and American Colonial Identity, 1765-1775" (2012). *Honors Projects and Presentations: Undergraduate*. 142.

<https://mosaic.messiah.edu/honors/142>

### Sharpening Intellect | Deepening Christian Faith | Inspiring Action

Messiah University is a Christian university of the liberal and applied arts and sciences. Our mission is to educate men and women toward maturity of intellect, character and Christian faith in preparation for lives of service, leadership and reconciliation in church and society.

[www.Messiah.edu](http://www.Messiah.edu)

One University Ave. | Mechanicsburg PA 17055

Reading the Leaves: Tea and American Colonial Identity, 1765-1775

May 12, 2012

Amanda Mylin

Department of History, Messiah College

Reading the Leaves: Tea and American Colonial Identity, 1765-1775

AN HONORS THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY, MESSIAH  
COLLEGE IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS OF A  
DEPARTMENTAL HONORS PROJECT

May 2012

Amanda Mylin

---

John Fea, Ph.D.  
Thesis Supervisor

## An Elegy

Alas! (said Cynthia, as she pour'd the Tea)  
What Sorrows crowd around my Heart;  
Time quickly hastes with rapid Wings away,  
When thou and I, like dearest Friends, must part.

The worthy Fathers of our western Main,  
Fir'd with the Love and Welfare of their Race,  
Forbid thy Presence more our Cups to stain,  
Or sink us deeper in the last Disgrace.

Unlucky Herb! foredoom'd, in Tyrant's Hands,  
To blast our Joys, and all our Sorrows raise,  
The impious Instrument to burst the Bands,  
Which long united us in Britain's Praise.

From Climes remote, near to the Dawn of Day,  
No more shall Vessels waft thee to our Shores;  
Thy chearing Influence shall be far away,  
Or lie neglected in our lonesome Stores.

The happy Daughters of thy native Land,  
Well pleas'd, may cull thee from thy native Plant;  
Nor know the Terrors of a Tyrant's Hand,  
Or what it is that Liberty to want.

No more Tea-table Equipage adorn  
Our Rooms, a Radiance to Beholder's Night;  
But some dark Cell shall hold thee all forlorn,  
Where not a Chink admits a Ray of Light.

No more gay Circles round thy Board shall throng,  
To drink delicious Mixture by thee made;  
No more shall harmless Scandal from the Tongue  
Of beauteous Nymphs around thee e'er be play'd.

But lost, dissolv'd in our superior Cares,  
Thy Name forgot, thy Virtues hid in Sight;  
Thou sink'st, unthought of, 'midst the Round of Years,  
And art forever banish'd from our Sight.<sup>1</sup>

-Anonymous, 1775

---

<sup>1</sup> *Connecticut Courant*, 6 March 1775, in *Early American Newspapers*.

Cynthia, an American colonist, had her heart broken as she made the conscious decision to eliminate the purchase and consumption of tea from her daily routine. For her, taking tea like the British was an ordinary practice that would have been extremely difficult to surrender, but her patriotic duty to oppose Parliamentary taxation was more important. The majority of colonists led very British lives that involved consuming various British goods. The culture of colonial America in the years just before the American Revolution was very similar to the “Old Country” in England. The same clothing styles with the same types of cloth as those in London graced the stature of ladies and men in Boston and Philadelphia. American colonists had the same buttons sewn upon their jackets. Colonists like Cynthia filled their British ceramic tea cups with British tea in the same fashion as their cousins across the Atlantic. Ordinary American colonists looked just like their British counterparts.

But it had not always been this way.

In the early years of colonial settlement, wealthy colonists were the only ones who could afford to regularly purchase British commercial goods. However, around the middle of the eighteenth century, as goods became more common and more affordable, ordinary colonists began to participate in the purchase of British goods more often. Historian T.H. Breen refers to this mass consumption trend as a “consumer revolution.”<sup>2</sup> As a result of this revolution, the years leading up to 1767 were filled with an increasing sense of the colonies’ Britishness, a concept known among historians as Anglicization. Contrary to belief that American colonists were growing more estranged from the British, the metropolises and the provinces were actually, in a cultural and commercial sense, becoming more alike. As Breen notes, the colonial marketplace featured, “an exceptionally rapid expansion of consumer *choice*, an increasing *standardization* of

---

<sup>2</sup> T.H. Breen, *Marketplace of Revolution: How Consumer Politics Shaped American Independence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 65.

consumer behavior, and a pervasive *Anglicization* of the American market.”<sup>3</sup> Colonists wanted to be like their sophisticated relatives in England, so they got into the habit of consuming British goods.

One British good in particularly high demand was tea. Tea was a common part of everyday life in the Anglo-American world. As American colonists purchased more and more tea from Great Britain, they adopted British tea rituals until taking the beverage became a common daily event in both settings. Few in the Anglo-American world could imagine life without drinking tea. By 1767, though, the colonies were forced to question this practice in the wake of the imposition of Parliamentary taxation without colonial representation. Suddenly, the purchase of British goods became problematic. The consumption of goods taxed by Parliament was linked, in the minds of patriots, to the support of the British’s unfair taxation scheme. Tea quickly became a taboo purchase. Normal colonial American lives were distressed. Colonists did not understand how they could be expected to live normally without the daily ritual and comfort of drinking tea. This British tradition was so ingrained into the minds of American colonists that it was nearly impossible to imagine life without it.

Patriotic colonists were unhappy and simply wanted representation in Parliament in order to be taxed. Their struggle with Parliament to gain this representation was executed through the process of non-consumption. Since everyone benefited from the consumer revolution sweeping the Anglo-American world, everyone could also work toward resisting such consumer purchases. Eventually it became obvious that Great Britain was not going to back down and let liberty thrive in the American colonies, thus making independence a serious consideration and soon a reality. This process of shedding political ties with the Mother Country was extremely difficult for the

---

<sup>3</sup>T.H. Breen, “‘Baubles of Britain’: The American and Consumer Revolutions of the Eighteenth Century,” *Oxford Journals: The Past and Present Society* 119 (May 1988): 79.

colonists, but it was also a great hardship to break cultural ties by shedding the use of British goods and objects, especially tea. Shaking off British cultural norms was like trying to change their inner nature. Therefore, the culture surrounding tea and the struggle of American colonists to shed themselves of this luxury is a lens through which to view the shift from Anglicization to independence in eighteenth-century North America.

### Tea as a Common Social Event

By the year 1767, American colonists, both wealthy and poor, men and women, were consuming tea daily. It would be nearly impossible to imagine life without British tea rituals. Tea began its popularity among the upper classes in the British Isles where elites took their cue from Catherine of Braganza, the Queen consort and Portuguese wife of King Charles II. While she may not have initially introduced tea to the Isles, she is certainly responsible for its popularity. Afternoon tea became a tradition. Soon it spread to include ordinary members of society through the popularity of tea gardens and coffeehouses.<sup>4</sup> Yet, despite widespread participation among various levels of society, it retained an upper class feeling. Women of all social classes took tea together in their homes just like Queen Catherine had done.

In addition to the popularity of tea in Great Britain, consumerism and tea drinking also became a serious trend in the colonies. The entire Anglo-American world became obsessed with tea. Historian Benjamin Carp mentions that, “The striving ‘middle class’ of tradesmen, professionals, and landowners couldn’t resist the chance to partake in this elite pastime. You didn’t have to have a hereditary title, or even be particularly wealthy, to sip respectably at the tea

---

<sup>4</sup>Roy Moxham, *Tea: Addiction, Exploitation, and Empire* (New York: Carroll & Graf Publishers, 2003), 18, 40; Beatrice Hohenegger, *Liquid Jade: the Story of Tea from East to West* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2006), 71, 78, 188.

table.” Tea allowed average Americans to feel as if they had something in common with the elite English aristocracy.<sup>5</sup> Through tea and other consumer items, Americans felt an impenetrable connection with Great Britain. There could be no doubt about the popularity and daily necessity of tea in the Anglo-American world.<sup>6</sup> It had begun its cultural infiltration with the social elite of England and had been democratized to fit the average lives of British subjects.

As colonial American lives became ensnared in the commercial marketplace and consumption of goods became necessary for happiness, tea became more popular. It had both its lovers and its critics. Critics found it beneficial for energy, but incapable of filling a stomach. It was thus a waste of income. Yet there were many equally strong arguments to explain its popularity. First and foremost, the strong desire to purchase British goods in the marketplace contributed to the rate at which Anglo-Americans were consuming tea. American colonists especially were purchasing British goods quickly, causing them to appear more British. Naturally, tea was a prized consumable. It also provided a late afternoon stimulant, allowed for social stability in the form of a domestic ritual, and created an imagined sense of status.<sup>7</sup>

American colonists had a fascination with the purchase of British items, but rather than committing to the labor necessary to produce their own goods, they chose the easiest option: buy them. Tea was a commodity grown in China, but because the American colonies were linked to the Mother Country through a system of mercantilism, it could only be purchased from England. Mercantilism ensured that only Great Britain would benefit American purchases. Because tea

---

<sup>5</sup> Benjamin L. Carp, *Defiance of the Patriots: The Boston Tea Party and the Making of America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 56.

<sup>6</sup> Carp, *Defiance of the Patriots*, 58.

<sup>7</sup> Carp, *Defiance of the Patriots*, 54.



came from China, it was seen as exotic and desirable. It was not something that could be had simply by growing it in the colonies. It had to be acquired through consumerism.<sup>8</sup>

The marketplace made luxuries available even to lower and middle class colonists. Tea was one of these so-called “luxuries.” In fact, such luxuries quickly became necessities of life.<sup>9</sup> Between 1720 and 1770, the consumption of goods in the colonies increased by fifty percent, with the greatest acceleration of consumption occurring between 1750 and 1770.<sup>10</sup> During this period tea became increasingly popular. Newspaper advertising helped to fuel the fire for consumption of British goods. As Breen argues, “American consumption...became, in fact, a seal of imperial patriotism.”<sup>11</sup> Even the poor consumed tea daily as if it were absolutely necessary. New Englanders especially grew to be quite fond of the beverage. According to historian Benjamin Carp, “By the 1770s, tea equipment could be found in around half of all probated estates for the deceased in Massachusetts. Tea was not some rare treat, but an everyday satisfaction for many.”<sup>12</sup>

One valuable trait for tea was its stimulative benefits. In the Anglo-American world of the eighteenth century, tea was inextricably linked with sugar. Traditionally, the Chinese drank their tea without sugar, but it was a necessity for those in the Atlantic world. In fact, it has been suggested that tea was a vehicle for acceptable indulgence in sugar.<sup>13</sup> Not only did this link tea with stimulation, but it also created another connection with the consumer market. The British North American colonies bought their sugar from the plantations of the Caribbean, cultivated by the harsh conditions of African-American slave labor. By putting small quantities into their tea, it

---

<sup>8</sup>Terrence H. Witkowski, "Colonial Consumers in Revolt: Buyer Values and Behavior During the Nonimportation Movement, 1764-1776," *The Journal of Consumer Research* 16 (Sept. 1989): 219-220.

<sup>9</sup> Witkowski, "Colonial Consumers in Revolt," 219; Breen, *Marketplace of Revolution*, 53.

<sup>10</sup> Breen, *Marketplace of Revolution*, 61.

<sup>11</sup> Breen, *Marketplace of Revolution*, 93.

<sup>12</sup> Carp, *Defiance of the Patriots*, 58.

<sup>13</sup> Moxham, *Tea: Addiction, Exploitation, and Empire*, 31.

was probably easier to justify their use of sugar and also allowed them to partake of the sweet substance in a respectable manner. It is interesting to point out that North American colonists took advantage of this cheap sugar produced by slave labor. Much of their earnings were spent in an Atlantic market that was based on the lives of fellow human beings.<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, sugar was essential to the practice of taking tea and it was something that needed to be had in order to gain the stimulative benefits of the beverage.

Not only did the sugar in tea provide an extra rush, but the caffeine provided a popular perk. The ritual nature of drinking tea supplemented Anglo-Americans with a caffeine stimulant that helped cure the need to go to sleep early.<sup>15</sup> Tea allowed a person to delay bedtime so as to have a more productive and full day. Those in the middle class found themselves wrapped in a vicious cycle in which they felt encouraged to work harder each day due to caffeine stimulation. Then, through their increased level of production they were able to afford even more tea, and could then glean the benefits of caffeine in order to be more productive. Through all of this, colonists continued to contribute to the marketplace and consumption of British goods.<sup>16</sup> This contribution helped to increase the popularity and even necessity of tea in the Anglo-American world.

The ties developed between British citizens and American colonists through love of tea also allowed them to develop similar domestic rituals. In addition to creating energy, tea created a sense of stability and structure. Anglo-Americans participated heavily in the consumer market, especially through the purchase of tea, so drinking it each day became quite normal. Daily rituals

---

<sup>14</sup> Elizabeth Kowaleski-Wallace, *Consuming Subjects: Women, Shopping, and Business in the Eighteenth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 48.

<sup>15</sup> Roger Schmidt, "Caffeine and the Coming of the Enlightenment," *Raritan: A Quarterly Review* 23 (Summer 2003): 137-138

<sup>16</sup> Carp, *Defiance of the Patriots*, 56.

were established, most notably among women. They were able to spend time with other women in leisurely friendship, creating closeness through consumption of British goods. Tea gatherings also helped to combat the seclusion of spending time alone by providing families and women a reason to commune with one another.<sup>17</sup> Daily routines were formed around the consumption of tea that connected the colonies to British culture and caused them to act more British. To be British meant to participate in tea time. Such cultural bonds would be difficult to break. Ross W. Jamieson explains that, “In a culture drinks give structure to social life, acting to label expected forms of behavior. To drink a small beverage is to carry out a small ritual, an act that momentarily constructs a slightly more bearable, intelligible world from the chaos that threatens at all times.”<sup>18</sup> It would be difficult for Anglo-Americans to imagine their society devoid of tea; it was just a normal, comforting act. *The Spectator*, a publication run from 1711-1712, was considered a valuable accompaniment with morning breakfast tea.<sup>19</sup> On Monday, March 5, 1711, Richard Steele of *The Spectator* stated:

I would therefore in a very particular Manner recommend these my Speculations to all well-regulated Families, that set apart an Hour in every Morning for Tea and Bread and Butter; and would earnestly advise them for their Good to order this Paper to be punctually served up, and to be looked upon as a Part of the Tea Equipage.<sup>20</sup>

It is clear that tea was part of a normal routine. It is also clear that participating in consumerism by purchasing tea and its’ corresponding equipage was important because it contributed to creating “well-regulated Families.” The structure that tea provided each day was definitely a

---

<sup>17</sup> Alan and Iris Macfarlane, *The Empire of Tea: the Remarkable History of the Plant that Took over the World* (New York: The Overlook Press, 2003): 86.

<sup>18</sup> Ross W. Jamieson, “The Essence of Commodification: Caffeine Dependencies in the Early Modern World,” *Journal of Social History* 35, 2 (Winter 2001): 279-280.

<sup>19</sup> John Fea, *The Way of Improvement Leads Home: Philip Vickers Fithian and the Rural Enlightenment in Early America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 143.

<sup>20</sup> Steele, *The Spectator*, Vol. 1 No. 4, March 5, 1711.

major reason for the popularity of tea among middle and lower classes in the Anglo-American world.

As already noted, this “democratization” of tea among lower classes and among colonists allowed them to feel as though they were sophisticated and elite members of British society, not unlike Catherine of Braganza. Tea created an imagined sense of status. First, because tea was warm, it provided the sensation of being full and often supplemented meals for the lower classes.<sup>21</sup> Colonists, especially the poor, were captivated by the prospect of purchasing the same British tea as their wealthier neighbors. Five to ten percent of poor peoples’ income went toward the purchase of something as frivolous as tea and sugar.<sup>22</sup> Breakfast would not be complete without tea and toast. The beverage was consumed at least two times a day.<sup>23</sup> As tea grew popular in the Anglo-American world, status became less associated with wealth and more connected to respectability and how a person should carry oneself.<sup>24</sup> The democratization of tea made even the lowest class commoner capable of participating in the same event as the social elite. Carp notes that:

Tea-drinking endured, nonetheless, and eventually the habit became respectable all over the British Empire. From Bristol to Boston, tea had become “*a necessary of life*.”...Britons and Americans came around to the idea that anyone could potentially elevate himself or herself (and, by extension, the whole country!) by partaking in tea.<sup>25</sup>

In the colonies, tea created a sense of community and social cohesion that transcended class. The marketplace became a unifying force. The easy access to tea made it an equalizer. It made everyone, rich and poor, a member of the British cultural world.

---

<sup>21</sup> Hohenegger, *Liquid Jade*, 100.

<sup>22</sup> Moxham, *Tea: Addiction, Exploitation, and Empire*, 44.

<sup>23</sup> Macfarlane, *The Empire of Tea*, 71, 203.

<sup>24</sup> Jamieson, “The Essence of Commodification,” 284.

<sup>25</sup> Carp, *Defiance of the Patriots*, 63.

## Tea as a Political Symbol: the Townshend Duties

Fascination with tea and dependency upon it would play a vital role in the political struggle that descended upon the colonies in the late 1760s. With the passing of the Stamp Act in 1765, it became clear that Parliament and Prime Minister George Grenville would pursue a plan to tax the colonies to raise revenue in the wake of the Seven Years War. The Stamp Act was a direct tax, meaning that it would be laid on paper goods upon purchase at the store. Colonists resisted the Stamp Act because they believed that Parliament did not have the right to tax them unless they were represented. Many colonists were in favor of the creation of a colonial assembly that would allow the colonists to tax themselves. Resistance grew so strong that Parliament removed the Stamp Act in 1766, but it retained the right to tax if it so desired.

In 1767, more colonial turmoil ensued with the passing of the Townshend duties. The brainchild of Chancellor of the Exchequer Charles Townshend, Townshend duties required taxes to be paid on glass, paint, paper, and tea. This tax was indirect (meaning it was collected at colonial port), but the colonists were infuriated nonetheless. They began writing in resistance to the Townshend duties and continued to defend the concept of “no taxation without representation.” Colonists began to boycott taxable items, including tea.<sup>26</sup> Tea would quickly play an instrumental role in steering the direction of the new governmental policy.

The cherished tradition of taking tea each day was becoming a controversial practice for American colonists. With the advent of the Townshend duties, tea, the object that connected the colonists to the British culture, became a political symbol. The popularity of boycotting to

---

<sup>26</sup> Gordon Wood, *The American Revolution: A History* (New York: Modern Library, 2002), 20, 31-33.

demand fair representation spread through the colonies and the taste of tea became bittersweet. Tea was a beloved good, believed to be a necessary aspect of life, but drinking it would only serve to encourage Parliament's unjust taxation. In order to avoid purchase of British consumer items, colonists would have to resolve to live more frugal lives. Rather than easily buying goods from the marketplace, they would either live without them or make the items themselves. Formerly, colonists had shared a fascination for purchasing goods. Now, this fascination would instead help "strangers persuade each other" to eliminate the purchase of goods from their lives.<sup>27</sup> They had all consumed together. Now they would all attempt to boycott together.

Many arguments from the early eighteenth century about the negative effects of tea resurfaced during the late 1760s in order to help colonists persuade each other to refrain from partaking of it. Several vices that had long been debated included the unnecessary expenditure of money on tea, its vanity and poor manner-producing effects, and its negative effect on health. Gentlemen from a generation or two before the Townshend duties often found the purchase of tea to be a waste of money. A letter to the publisher featured in the *Boston Evening Post* in 1746 boldly claimed that the effects of tea were not nearly as bad as those of punch. However, because it was important to be frugal, the women had to be willing to resist drinking tea. It was not a necessity, just as punch was not a necessity.<sup>28</sup> This argument, when originally made, did not take strong root as evidenced by the massive amounts of tea purchased in the era preceding the Townshend duties. Colonists up and down the east coast drank tea religiously. Soon, though, this argument for frugality was rekindled in order to fuel the Townshend Act boycott.

Being frugal and self-productive was difficult for colonists. It seemed counter-intuitive to a culture that was so used to purchasing all of its needs and desires. In fact, American colonists

---

<sup>27</sup> Breen, *Marketplace of Revolution*, 23.

<sup>28</sup> *Boston Evening-Post*. 25 August 1746, in Early American Newspapers.

had never been in competition with Great Britain before. Still, they knew that in order to make their point about liberty and representation they would need to strike where the most harm could be done: the market. It was a struggle. Colonists were pulled in two directions. One arm was pulled toward frugality, non-consumption, and “a celebration of American-made goods,” and the other toward their natural inclination of consumerism and “growing material appetites.”<sup>29</sup> Consuming British goods was normal for colonists. Therefore, in order to promote frugality and non-consumption, newspapers took on a persuasive role. In 1767, the town of Boston produced a list of items for colonists to eliminate from their purchases in order to pursue frugality and avoid debt and poverty. Tea was not on the list. It did not take long for the ladies of the town to band together and decide that tea should never have been left off of such a list of items. They “resolved to omit the Use of it for the future.”<sup>30</sup>

Similarly, a poem printed in the *Connecticut Journal* on the first day of the year 1768, argued that it was unnecessary to waste money purchasing tea from halfway around the world when it could be just as easily acquired in the colonies. Of course the herbs grown in the colonies did not taste the same as the Chinese tea sold by the British, but the colonists nevertheless argued to “Pursue the frugal Plan” in order to persuade one another that it was ridiculous to spend money on an unfairly taxed item. Furthermore, this poem not only argued that they were wasting money upon tea, but that they had to purchase sugar from the islands in order to supplement it.<sup>31</sup> Therefore, they were unnecessarily spending money on sugar as well. Even though tea had been perceived as a necessity of life, colonists pushed one another to grasp the extent of their newly-realized folly.

---

<sup>29</sup> Witkowski, “Colonial Consumers in Revolt,” 217.

<sup>30</sup> *Boston Gazette*, 2 November 1767, in *Early American Newspapers*.

<sup>31</sup> *Connecticut Journal*, 1 January 1768, in *Early American Newspapers*.

In order to persuade each other that frugality was imperative to ending the Townshend duties, it was also suggested that colonists think of frugality as a key quality to look for in a romantic partner. This meant that colonists were encouraged only to take interest in others who wore homespun clothing and did not drink tea from halfway around the world. Traditionally, those who flaunted their British purchases and drank tea daily were seen as eye-catching, classy people who attracted the interests of the opposite gender. Therefore, the presentation of frugality as an attractive quality in the *Connecticut Courant* in 1768 may have appeared unusual to young colonists. One particular article in this newspaper claimed that it was important for colonists to “appear as lovers of their Country, before they shall receive the common token of Love from their partners.”<sup>32</sup> If a colonist was more interested in the appearance of sophistication through the consumption of British goods rather than in loving their country and seeking liberty, it would become increasingly difficult for them to find a romantic partner in the Townshend boycott era. The *Connecticut Courant* article strove to promote frugality by convincing colonists to find beauty and value in colonial-made goods, and in turn, finding interest in other similarly-convinced colonists. Articles like these, no doubt, served to encourage young colonists to take action in boycotting British goods. They would have to wrestle with their desire for consumption of goods in order to promote their beliefs about unfair taxation. The early eighteenth-century argument for frugality, as opposed to the more recent popularity of consumerism, had infiltrated the personal lives of American colonists to convince them to participate in anti-Townshend duty sentiments.

The boycotts that transpired following the passing of the Townshend Acts began to make it evident that in order for political freedom to be returned to the status quo, frugality was vital.

---

<sup>32</sup> *Connecticut Courant*, 8 April 1767, in *Early American Newspapers*.



Of the taxable items, tea proved to be a political symbol since it was not a necessity for survival. Many colonists may have thought they needed tea each day, but in reality it was a luxury item. To help colonists make the connection between current political affairs and tea, a newspaper column in February 1770, representative of many such anti-tea articles, stated that “You certainly then will not hesitate to debar yourselves of so unnecessary, and oftentimes so pernicious a gratification as that of drinking Tea, when the cause of freedom requires the sacrifice.” It also stated plainly that colonists should not drink imported tea or even allow it to be consumed in their homes.<sup>33</sup>

While frugality and non-consumption were strongly advised, colonists must have encountered temptation to sneak a few sips of the steaming beverage. In order to avoid this temptation, colonists grew American herbs instead. One man even attempted to grow Chinese tea in his backyard. The *Boston Gazette* in November of 1767 reported “Saturday last we were favored with a sight of the China Tea Plant in foliage, being cultivated by Capt. Harrison In this Town, some of the dried leaves being by Mrs. Harrison presented with the shrub in flavor exactly resembling the common Green Tea.”<sup>34</sup> This newspaper also asserted that a large amount of Chinese tea growing near Pepperrellborough tasted just as good in flavor as the type that was normally imported.<sup>35</sup> Some newspapers advocated the use of naturally grown herbs. The *Boston Post Boy* encouraged American colonists to grow Labrador tea, “lately discovered to be a common growth of the more northern colonies, and esteemed very wholesome to the human species, as well as agreeable.” It encouraged “cultivating and improving the natural advantages of our own country” in order to “preserve our *virtue* and our *liberty*.” The article ended with a

---

<sup>33</sup> *Boston Gazette*, 19 February 1770, in Early American Newspapers.

<sup>34</sup> *Boston Gazette*, 9 November 1767, in Early American Newspapers.

<sup>35</sup> *Boston Gazette*, 25 January 1768, in Early American Newspapers.

forceful “Save your Money, and save your Country!”<sup>36</sup> By persuading people to drink tea from their own land, the bands of Anglicization weakened. American-grown herbal tea was linked with the values of virtue and liberty. Those who continued to drink British tea were not friends of liberty.

Tea first became a political symbol in the wake of the Townshend taxes, but newspapers constantly harkened back to the age-old idea that tea was a waste of precious money. The *New Hampshire Gazette* in July of 1768 spoke of the North Carolinian’s resolve to drink Labrador and Hyperion teas rather than the “pernicious and destructive” Chinese tea “which annually drains America of some thousands.” They also recommended Yeopann tea.<sup>37</sup> Frugality was a common theme in these articles. Refusal to drink tea separated Americans from their British traditions, but most importantly it served to promote liberty and save money. So as the Townshend Acts carried onward, colonists, in order to promote the boycott, continued to hearken back to the argument that tea was a waste of precious money, an unnecessary expenditure.

Besides being a waste of money, another argument about tea from the early eighteenth century that resurfaced to promote the Townshend boycott was the belief that tea caused vain actions and poor manners. A direct correlation was often drawn between tea, women, and domestic life. Lower class women were especially given grief for spending too much money on tea rather than on vital items. They were also accused of neglecting their families while they socialized over tea with other women. Many men worried that women would neglect their children and chores and spend far too much money on what they perceived to be luxury items.<sup>38</sup> These men did not understand that for women, tea was a necessity, not a luxury. In the “News

---

<sup>36</sup> *Boston Post Boy*, 16 November 1767, in Early American Newspapers.

<sup>37</sup> *New Hampshire Gazette*, 22 July 1768, in Early American Newspapers.

<sup>38</sup> Carp, *Defiance of the Patriots*, 63.

from the Moon,” a satirical piece that discussed the vanity of the American colonies by comparing them to a corrupt fictional society on the moon, the author explained how prideful women depleted their husbands’ earnings through desires for fine things, tea, and coffee.<sup>39</sup> These men believed that tea was not worth spending money on and only promoted the vain desire of purchasing things.

Tea was also thought to produce poor manners. It provided women with the opportunity to gather and gossip, hence being idle and unproductive. Men felt threatened by the idea that women could gather together and feel empowered and free because they could make consumer choices.<sup>40</sup> It is clear that some in the early eighteenth century believed tea-drinking led to the deprivation of morals. In 1736, the “Tea-Table among Ladies” and the “Tavern among the Men” were seen as “places of new Invention for a Depravation of our Manners and Morals” and allowed for people to deal with “one another in the most unchristian and unfriendly Manner in the World.” Finally, the tea-table was believed to have a negative effect upon the “Characters of their Persons and Families.”<sup>41</sup> Earlier generations of colonists and Britons had thought that tea produced poor manners, and now the Townshend duties gave renewed force to this opinion. Colonists needed extra encouragement to avoid tea. Therefore, they returned to the idea that tea led to vanity, despite having recently thought that it created culture and respectability.

This negative view resurfaced in poems such as “The Female Patriot, No.1. Addressed to the Tea-Drinking Ladies of New York,” published May 30, 1770. In this poem, tea-drinking women were portrayed as having slid far to the bottom on the scale of moral values. Miss Hornbloom requests that her husband pick up some tea so that she is able to entertain Madam

---

<sup>39</sup> *News from the Moon, Containing a Brief Account of the Manners and Customs of the Inhabitants: Very Suitable to the Present Times* (Boston, 1772), 6, in Early American Imprints, Series I.

<sup>40</sup> Carp, *Defiance of the Patriots*, 64-65.

<sup>41</sup> *New York Weekly Journal*, 12 July 1736, in Early American Newspapers.

Strong that evening. Her husband protests, claiming that although their non-importation efforts have succeeded and Parliament “be blest” for removing the taxes, the tax on tea remains.<sup>42</sup> When he states, “We can’t import that Indian Weed, That Duty’s still a Rod above our Head,” she responds rather violently by flinging a broomstick at him and crying, “Go, dirty Clod-pole get me some Shushong.”<sup>43</sup> In the midst of their tussle, Madam Strong knocks at the door and Miss Hornbloom again implores her “Blockhead” husband to retrieve some tea. The poem concludes with Madam Strong’s apology for being late because her “stupid Husband too has gone astray, To wait upon the Sons of Liberty.”<sup>44</sup> Both women appear to the reader to be enemies of liberty and careless about the current political situation. They are only interested in serving themselves so they can participate in their social tea-drinking ritual and spend the evening gossiping together. It appears that tea has corrupted their behavior. Clearly, this poem allowed colonists to argue that tea was not worth drinking because its corruptive nature prevented support of liberty.

Many women defended themselves from accusations of vanity by bringing the behavior of men in taverns and alcohol into the picture. They did not find it fair that they could be judged for their character while consuming tea if men were not also judged for their drunken character. In fact, they were quite willing to give up tea-drinking for the cause of liberty if men would relinquish spirituous liquors. In terms of cost, they argued by asking if women should be the ones reforming “where it don’t cost half so much to entertain half a Dozen Ladies a whole Afternoon, as it does to entertain one Gentleman only one Evening at a Tavern.” Nevertheless, women

---

<sup>42</sup> The tax on tea was the only tax that remained after the Townshend duties were repealed.

<sup>43</sup> Souchong was a high quality type of Chinese tea imported by the British, in addition to Pekoe, Congou, Hyson, and the cheaper Bohea.

<sup>44</sup> “Addressed to the Tea Drinking Ladies of New York,” *Female Patriot No. 1*, New York, 10 May 1770, in *Early American Imprints*, Series I.

would consider the boycott of tea if men re-considered their lifestyles.<sup>45</sup> In a work entitled “The Drunken Husband and Tea-drinking Wife” from the 1760s, a husband chides his wife for sleeping until ten or twelve in the morning and then having the audacity to relax by making tea. He complains that because of these habits, her afternoon is spent gossiping, so she is not able to have dinner prepared on time. She is described as saucy, prideful, and indulgent. In response to her husband, she claims that tea-drinking is innocent, especially compared with his drunken habits. For her, it made a difference that tea could be enjoyed sober.<sup>46</sup> The appearance of this piece in print would surely have influenced opinions and forced colonists to think about the implications of giving up tea. If women were able to surrender their pleasure based on the conclusion that it was a vain habit, then they believed men could just as easily give up ale to encourage their wives’ endeavors. The renewed early eighteenth century argument that drinking tea produced vain women became a perfect reason for the encouragement of participation in a colony-wide boycott.

Another very early argument that resurfaced to discourage drinking tea during the political uproar of the Townshend duties was its supposed negative health effects. From the early to mid-eighteenth century, Jonas Hanway vehemently argued in opposition of tea-drinking because he believed it to produce adverse medical effects. Even though this concept was never originally agreed upon by all people, especially by Samuel Johnson, a contemporary of Hanway who drank tea religiously each day, it was upheld as correct during the Townshend era.<sup>47</sup> Although this argument is seen most prominently in a newspaper article from the next wave of boycotting under the Tea Act, it is still worth noting here. It begins by asking, “Can Posterity

---

<sup>45</sup> *Newport Mercury*, 7 July 1767, in Early American Newspapers.

<sup>46</sup> “The Drunken Husband and Tea-drinking Wife, &c.,” 1760, in Early American Imprints, Series I.

<sup>47</sup> Moxham, *Tea: Addiction, Exploitation, and Empire*, 34.

believe, that the constitutional liberties of North-Americans were on the point of being given up for tea? Is this exotic plant necessary to life; or does our health depend upon it? Just the reverse.” First, tea is linked to liberty. Second, it claims that it is an unnecessary and even unhealthy beverage. According to the author, tea stunts growth, causes weakness, nervousness, and despair. He even believes that if colonists continue drinking tea, eventually they will be like the “Pigmies.”<sup>48</sup> Instead, if a colonist absolutely must drink tea, they should drink herbs that grow on American soil. Interestingly, American-grown herbal teas were not believed to cause health problems. Regularly imported tea, however, was suddenly believed to cause poor health. Those who drank it not only harmed their health, but also their freedom. Overall, arguments for reasons of health, vanity, and expense encouraged colonists to abstain from tea. These reasons had been prominent in the early eighteenth century until colonial Americans took part in the consumer revolution and tea became a popular part of their culture. Therefore, once the Townshend duties were set in place, colonists needed help avoiding their favorite beverage. The only way to convince Parliament to repeal the Townshend acts and give the colonies a voice in Parliament would be to avoid tea-drinking. In order to enforce avoidance of tea, colonists reflected upon and advocated early eighteenth-century arguments that cast tea in a negative light. This entire process shows how American colonists had shifted from appearing and acting very British, to abstaining from tea and beginning to distinguish themselves from the Mother Country.

### Tea as a Political Symbol: The Tea Act

As mentioned in the poem “Addressed to the Tea-Drinking Ladies of New York,” all of the boycotting efforts made by the colonies proved successful. Great Britain had lost profits in

---

<sup>48</sup> *Massachusetts Spy*, 27 January, 1774, in Early American Newspapers.

the market and could no longer see how the Townshend acts were of any benefit. Since they were actually detrimental to Great Britain's economy, the Townshend duties were repealed, but the tax on tea remained.<sup>49</sup> Lord North reasoned that this was to be seen "as a mark of the supremacy of Parliament, and an efficient declaration of their right to govern the colonies."<sup>50</sup> While the colonists were unhappy about the remaining tax on tea, peace appeared to settle temporarily over the provinces until May of 1773 when the Tea Act was passed. This act was slightly different than the former Townshend duties because it did not increase duties on the already taxed tea, but actually sold tea cheaper to colonists. The problem was the conniving manner in which it was implemented. The East India Company, which provided England with the tea it sold to the colonies, was suffering. In order to help the company survive, England allowed it to sell tea directly to the Americans. The catch was that it had to be sold through merchants favored by the East India Company. All other merchants suffered at the hands of the new act because they were unable to sell tea at the cheap East India price.<sup>51</sup>

This time around the colonists' non-importation movement was fueled for different reasons. Since tea was actually cheaper as a result of the Tea Act, patriots had to encourage the average colonist of the importance of participating in the boycott. While tea may have been less expensive and a great temptation to purchase, consuming it would be un-patriotic. It seemed to patriotic colonists as if England were trying to promote the sale of taxed tea. This was inexcusable and outrageous considering Parliament's refusal to grant the colonies direct representation. Colonists already had to deal with the unfair taxation of tea, and now they were having the tax flaunted in their faces through cheap sales promotion. Colonial merchants were

---

<sup>49</sup> Wood, *The American Revolution*, 35-36.

<sup>50</sup> Wood, *The American Revolution*, 36.

<sup>51</sup> Wood, *The American Revolution*, 37.

also upset that Parliament granted certain favored merchants the privilege of selling the cheap East India tea. The political response to the unjust Tea Act boiled until discontent, resulting in the famed Boston Tea Party in December of 1773. Other towns hosted tea burning parties to show their contempt both for Great Britain's refusal to grant representation and for its promotion of the sale of tea through select merchants. One statement appeared in the *Connecticut Courant* describing the "Funeral of Madam Souchong," or in plain terms, the burning of a large pyre of British Souchong tea. After being "greatly caressed by all ranks," meaning that all social levels of colonists had partaken of tea, she finally "became a common prostitute among the lower class of people." In other words, tea was eventually viewed as a disgraceful habit of the lower classes who should not have been throwing away their money on tea.<sup>52</sup> Portraying tea, or "Madam Souchong," as a prostitute shows that colonists no longer considered it acceptable to purchase or possess. The majority of colonists still probably missed drinking tea, but again, they needed an excuse to separate themselves from it. This "funeral" shows the intensity of the political climate in the wake of the Tea Act. Just like during the Townshend Act, tea was a political symbol; however, this time it was worse. Not only were colonists boycotting tea, but they unified to express their anger through the destruction of tea.

The former shared sense of consumerism and Britishness among colonists was quickly evolving into a shared sense of political solidarity over the lack of Parliamentary representation. Breen points out that Americans began to imagine allegiances that went beyond their local communities.<sup>53</sup> Now that they encouraged one another to refuse British goods, especially tea, they found an inter-colonial alliance driven by the practice of non-consumption.<sup>54</sup> Drinking tea

---

<sup>52</sup> *Connecticut Courant*, 13 March 1775, in *Early American Newspapers*.

<sup>53</sup> Breen, *Marketplace of Revolution*, 247.

<sup>54</sup> Breen, *Marketplace of Revolution*, 253.



was no longer about individual choice. It affected everyone. In January of 1774, a patriotic colonist forcefully informed his fellow colonists that "...in the present case the use of tea is considered not as a *private* but a *public* evil." The writer continued trying to convince his fellow colonists of the political implications of tea-drinking:

I believe that every one will allow that though we were really convinced that the use of tea tends to injure our health, this does not imply that it tends to enslave our country. As this is a very important consideration I really wish it were generally understood and attended so, and as in your opinion its being saddled with a tribute, &c is the strongest argument against continuing the use of it, we are not to consider it merely as the herb tea, or as what has an ill tendency as to health, but as it is made a handle of to introduce a variety of public grievances and oppressions amongst us.<sup>55</sup>

This writer affirms his belief that tea does cause poor health, but its association with Parliamentary oppressiveness an even stronger argument for avoiding it. He implores colonists to care about liberty and break free from the bonds of enslavement that Great Britain has placed upon them by refusing to drink (non-consumption) or even purchase (non-importation) tea.

Non-consumption and non-importation of tea was directly connected to the refusal to be enslaved by Parliament. This intensification of the political climate can be viewed through the rhetoric surrounding the evil of drinking tea. A fine example of this rhetoric can be found in a "Sermon on Tea," printed in 1773. Aside from the popularly accepted drawbacks of tea, which included its tendency to create gossip, its cost, and its negative health effects, the consumption of tea is also described as politically absurd. The anonymous author asserts that "this baneful herb is the match by which an artful wicked ministry intended to blow up the liberties of America." This almost makes it sound as if tea were solely responsible for political discontentment. He continues with a vision of Lord North standing "upon the shoulders of a venal parliament" stretching his hands out to hold "Tea, chains and military law, whilst the guardian genius of

---

<sup>55</sup> *Massachusetts Spy*, 6 January 1774, in *Early American Newspapers*.

America, pensive hangs her drooping head....” Yet this so-called guardian collects her remaining strength and makes a statement reminiscent of Eve in the Garden of Eden: “Taste not the forbidden fruit; for in the day ye eat thereof, ye shall surely die.” The author woefully states that “Here and there a silly Eve, regardless of her countries call, stretches forth her unthinking hand, and receives the accursed herb with all its baneful attendants. I quit the disagreeable subject, and blush that I belong to that rank of beings which would fell their country for Tea.” The author was clearly disgusted that any colonist would consider being selfish enough to put the drinking of tea above a love for their country.<sup>56</sup> It is, according to him, a great unpardonable sin.

The parting “exhortation” of this “sermon” is revealing: “Let me exhort all, as they love their country, to discourage the use of this badge of slavery. The gratification of appetite brought ‘sin into the world, and all our woe.’ Let us not, Esau like, sell our birth-right for worse than a mess of pottage.”<sup>57</sup> Not only is tea seen as sinful, but drinking it is the equivalent of slavery to an unfair Parliament. It can also be inferred that patriotic colonists believed their birthright to be the right to liberty. The remaining tax on tea, as manifested in the new Tea Act, was enslaving the colonists to the Mother Country. Non-importation and non-consumption were the strategy for removing the chains of oppression. Colonists encouraged each other to do this through their shared absence of consuming goods, and instead boycotted together. Newspapers were vital in spreading the word of the evilness of tea. Language surrounding tea was intense. For instance, the *Massachusetts Spy* claimed tea to be innocent unless it is directly linked with “the ruin of government.” In that case, it should be treated “as we would THE PLAGUE.”<sup>58</sup> On January 6, 1774, an article in the same newspaper lamented “That the people have not virtue enough to quit

---

<sup>56</sup> Francis Bailey, “A Sermon on Tea,” Lancaster, 1774, 3-6, in Early American Imprints, Series I.

<sup>57</sup> Bailey, “A Sermon on Tea,” 8.

<sup>58</sup> *Massachusetts Spy*, 14 October, 1773, in Early American Newspapers.

India tea, or any one superfluity, to save themselves and posterity from eternal slavery.”<sup>59</sup> Terms like “slavery,” “ruin of government,” and “chains” were tossed around to describe the belief of patriotic colonists about the despicable situation they were stuck in. It also served to encourage more reluctant colonists to join the bandwagon and boycott tea. This powerful rhetoric about tea illustrates the intensification of revolutionary politics in the wake of the Tea Act.

### Tea as a Constant Temptation

Despite the patriotic push to avoid tea because of its association with slavery to Parliament, non-importation and non-consumption was not an easy feat. Anglicization had made its mark upon colonial culture and could not be simply removed. Colonists may have liked to think that they could easily resist tea because of their great love of liberty, but tea was a natural part of their social culture. Breen says, “The revolutionary generation’s attempts to organize large-scale consumer boycotts were so difficult precisely because earlier Americans had so enthusiastically endorsed British manufactures. People of humble means were just as concerned as elite Americans with the articles that were advertised in the local journals.”<sup>60</sup> To remove tea-drinking from colonial lives would be to remove a part of their inmost being. It had been viewed as a necessity. Now it was a necessity that they could not have. Mixed messages even appeared within advertising. Non-consumption was advocated, but as soon as any sort of political resolution was made colonists would lapse into consumerism again.<sup>61</sup> At any rate, the struggle to give up tea-drinking was not viewed as a permanent decision.

---

<sup>59</sup> *Massachusetts Spy*, 6 January 1774, in *Early American Newspapers*.

<sup>60</sup> Breen, *Marketplace of Revolution*, 70-71.

<sup>61</sup> Witkowski, “Colonial Consumers in Revolt,” 224.

The continuation of smuggling served as evidence to the fact that the shedding of tea from one's daily routine was difficult. Throughout the Townshend duties, smuggling of Dutch tea occurred because it was cheaper than purchasing tea from Great Britain. Drinking home-grown herbs was recommended, but for those who had a difficult time giving up their beloved China tea, Dutch-smuggled tea was the only other option. Dutch tea was half the price of the taxed British tea and made up over half the amount of tea drank in the colonies during the eighteenth century.<sup>62</sup> Colonists struggled over the morality of drinking tea smuggled from Holland. Even though smugglers could avoid paying unfair British duties, patriotic colonists were concerned with the general encouragement of drinking tea that accompanied smuggling. Therefore, smugglers were seen as patriots for undermining British trade, but were also seen as "unvirtuous" for encouraging the practice of taking tea and feeding consumerism.<sup>63</sup> After all, tea was the tangible political symbol of the struggle over liberty with Great Britain. As historian Jane T. Merritt explains it, "there was never such an easy division between right, patriotic behavior and wrong, unpatriotic behavior – in either the minds or actions of eighteenth-century colonists."<sup>64</sup> Therefore, the acceptability of smuggling could not be easily defined, even among patriots.

Smugglers took a hard hit with the enforcement of the Tea Act. Ironically, besides patriots and merchants, some of the angriest reactions to the new act were from smugglers. Since the act allowed tea to be sold directly to the colonies for a cheaper price than the Dutch were able to sell it for, smugglers were outsold. This cheap East India tea, as mentioned previously, was a temptation for American colonists. In 1773, one Isaac Van Pompkin published a small article

---

<sup>62</sup> Hohenegger, *Liquid Jade*, 124.

<sup>63</sup> Jane T. Merritt, "Tea Trade, Consumption, and the Republican Paradox in Prerevolutionary Philadelphia," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 128 (April 2004): 119.

<sup>64</sup> *ibid.*

trying to persuade people to realize that despite having cheaper tea, their liberties were still at stake. However, he was realistic enough to realize that colonists were not easily swayed from drinking their necessary dose of tea, so he reluctantly consented to permitting Dutch-smuggled tea. He asked that they “dispatch our Dutch Tea immediately, that we may get it sold before the English arrives.”<sup>65</sup> Anything is better for him than for colonists to drink British East India tea. Avoiding it, though, was certainly a struggle.

This struggle was evident even among famous patriots. Consumerism and Britishness had a strong foothold in the thirteen colonies, making it difficult to convince the average person of the importance of rejecting British culture due to an ideological disagreement about liberty. Even those supporting the political cause of liberty were slow to quit drinking tea. Philip Vickers Fithian, a patriot from southern New Jersey, experienced a slow transition from tea-drinking to abstention. In 1773 and 1774, while a tutor at Nomini Hall in Virginia, he noted taking tea during various visits. By late 1774 things had changed. On Sunday, May 29, he noted that Virginians, “Drank Coffee at four, they are now too patriotic to use tea.” Perhaps the best example of a definitive transition from tea to coffee was his journal entry on the evening of Monday, September 26:

Something in our palace this Evening, very merry happened – Mrs. Carter made a dish of Tea. At Coffee, she sent me a dish - & the Colonel both ignorant – He smelt, sipt – look’d – At last with great gravity he asks what’s this? – Do you ask Sir – Poh! – And out he throws it splash a sacrifice to Vulcan.<sup>66</sup>

---

<sup>65</sup> Isaac Van Pompkin, Sec., “To the Agents of Their High Mightiness...,” 28 October 1773, in *Early American Newspapers*.

<sup>66</sup> *Journal and Letters of Philip Vickers Fithian, 1773-1774: a Plantation Tutor of the Old Dominion*, edited by John Williams, Applewood Books: Carlisle, Massachusetts, 62, 164, 168, 171-172, 194, 258, 260; Fea, *The Way of Improvement Leads Home*, 143-144.

So while Fithian vehemently rejected tea because it was unpatriotic, it did not occur to him until 1774, well into the turmoil over the tea tax and Tea Act. Even the founding fathers took a while timeto join in on the protest.

John Adams, well known to posterity as a great leader of the American Revolutionary era, struggled with whether or not drinking tea was acceptable. He wrote a letter to his wife Abigail on July 6, 1774 and described a moment of realization he had had while stopping at Mrs. Huston's home. He said that he had ridden at least thirty-five miles when he stopped and asked for refreshment. Specifically he asked, "Madam...is it lawfull for a weary Traveller to refresh himself with a Dish of Tea provided it has been honestly smuggled, or paid no Duties?" She responded, "No sir...we have renounced all Tea in this Place. I can't make Tea, but I'll make you Coffee." He concluded his letter by telling Abigail, "Accordingly I have drank Coffee every Afternoon since, and have borne it very well. Tea must be universally renounced. I must be weaned, and the sooner, the better."<sup>67</sup> After being reprimanded about drinking tea, even smuggled tea, by a woman no less, Adams decided that he must lend his full patriotic support to non-consumption. That this famous patriot was not able to make a definitive decision to boycott tea until July of 1774 shows the power of British culture on colonial lives. British customs were not something that could be easily thrown off. It is quite likely that John Adams felt as if surrendering tea-drinking was similar to surrendering a piece of his identity.

Occasionally colonists were so reluctant to surrender their tea-drinking habits that they were willing to give up food and other necessities before giving up luxuries. While they would seldom admit their attachment to tea due to the political consequences such an attachment might have, statistics show that the habit did not entirely disappear. In fact, tea-drinking seemed to

---

<sup>67</sup> "Letter from John Adams to Abigail Adams," 6 July 1774, *Adams Family Papers: An Electronic Archive*, The Massachusetts Historical Society.

increase between 1770 and 1773.<sup>68</sup> Deciding to participate in the tea boycott was not an easy decision, but it was full of indecision and grievous struggle. It was a difficult process of moving away from dependency upon Great Britain.

Even homegrown teas were unsatisfying. They provided a viable alternative option, but were just not the same. Colonists had to work hard to convince themselves that herbal teas were palatable. Deep down they knew that British tea tasted better and that it was less work to go to the marketplace and spend money than to spend time cultivating it in the garden and preparing it for drinking. Taking tea was so “ingrained” into colonial American taste buds that drinking herbal substitutes were less than appealing.<sup>69</sup> During the period of the Townshend duties, the *Boston Gazette* attempted to convince readers that Labrador tea was just as good as, and possibly better than, real Chinese tea. The article stated, “that tho’ it may not be as perfectly suited to every ones Relish at first essay, a little Perseverance will render it very acceptable.”<sup>70</sup> But Labrador tea would never be a replacement for consumer desires. Colonists had tasted luxury throughout the eighteenth century and it was nigh unto impossible to require them to simply switch their preferences. Boycotting was not something that came easily.

In order to enforce the boycott, humiliation tactics were put into place. Patriots found this necessary to encourage colonists to discontinue the use of tea. Humiliation tactics included subscription lists, having one’s name printed in the newspaper, and public tarring and feathering. Colonists were encouraged to ask one another about their tea drinking habits. On January 27, 1774, “Deborah Doubtful,” writing in the *Massachusetts Spy*, stated that patriotic women had agreed to question others who still drank the “detestable drug.” If they were non-repentant of

---

<sup>68</sup> Merritt, “Tea Trade, Consumption, and the Republican Paradox in Prerevolutionary Philadelphia,” 144-145; Fea, *The Way of Improvement Leads Home*, 143.

<sup>69</sup> Carp, *Defiance of the Patriots*, 67-68.

<sup>70</sup> *Boston Gazette*, 7 December 1767, in *Early American Newspapers*.

drinking tea, then the women would give them a reason to be repentant for their evident lack of the love of their country. Smugglers of Dutch tea were also to be “exposed as they deserve.”<sup>71</sup> The threat of being exposed as a traitor of liberty was a frightening way to keep people from consuming that which they loved. In some towns, colonists signed their names on subscription lists to proclaim their resolution to boycott tea. This was a bold move, especially if the statement was not carried through and strictly observed.<sup>72</sup> The fact that tea-drinking had to be regulated shows just how difficult it was to resist the tempting herb.

Women found it especially difficult to resist tea. The stereotype that tea was a feminine beverage was exaggerated, but definitely true. British women were consumers, and in turn, American women consumed as well. Since a woman’s job was to buy tea and its accompanying instruments, it felt strange to not buy these items.<sup>73</sup> The link between women and tea must have been so great that one particular man, William Beadle, worried about leaving his wife alone for fear that she would partake of British tea. In a poem, Beadle pleads with other women in his community to purchase his excess tea so that his wife will not be tempted by it. All tea must be gone by the first of March, “That woful day, when each of ye, Must leave your darling Nectar, TEA!” On that day, fine chinaware would have to be neglected and the tea-kettle would become a porridge pot. Even for this man, this will be the day “That must deprive us of our Joy.” Also, despite his reluctance to give up tea on that day and his plea asking his neighbors to buy his extra tea, he makes it clear that he is not a Tory. He just finds it wasteful to throw away tea that had been acceptably purchased at an earlier date. His first inclination was to lock and bar his extra tea on March 1<sup>st</sup>, but then he remembers his wife. His concern is “if she proves of Eve the Daughter,

---

<sup>71</sup> *Massachusetts Spy*, 27 January 1774, in *Early American Newspapers*.

<sup>72</sup> Breen, *Marketplace of Revolution*, 25.

<sup>73</sup> Kowaleski-Wallace, “Colonial Consumers in Revolt,” 23.



To have a Kind of Hank'ring after This noxious Herb, and when I'm gone, With Ax or Hatchet, should lay on, With Arm and Will, both bold and stout, Should find this potent Poison out." In order that they may both keep their virtue, he implores other ladies to help him finish off his excess pound of tea.<sup>74</sup> It is obvious that he does not trust his wife to be virtuous of her own will and thinks that she needs assistance in proving her love for liberty. While this is an overstatement, it reflects the belief that women were irrevocably wedded to tea. Carp tells several stories of women who snuck tea that was stored away in the basement or poured it out of a coffee pot to conceal its' true identity.<sup>75</sup> Women were used to making choices in the consumer marketplace and having this freedom taken away was not an easy transition.<sup>76</sup>

The refined society that developed around the tea-table had been very important to women and their families. Therefore, giving up the practice of drinking tea not only removed their favorite beverage, but also removed great opportunities to teach morality and etiquette. Despite the former and current misgivings about tea as vanity, it was closely associated with a certain level of respectability. Naturally this could be taught with any tea substitute, but the traditional association would be gone. Tea was a family event. It was taken in British and colonial American homes. While others could be invited to join them, it was a quiet event where the woman presided and manners and politeness were practiced.<sup>77</sup> This was true for the elite, but it also came to be true for lower classes who wanted to emulate wealthier members of society. Tea and respectability were inextricably linked; hence, women had difficulty boycotting tea because it would mean surrendering the social culture that was associated with drinking the beverage.

---

<sup>74</sup> *Connecticut Courant*, 30 January 1775, in *Early American Newspapers*.

<sup>75</sup> Carp, *Defiance of the Patriots*, 179.

<sup>76</sup> Breen, *Marketplace of Revolution*, 181-182.

<sup>77</sup> Carp, *Defiance of the Patriots*, 55-56.

Because women were so closely linked with consumerism and the traditions of drinking tea, they were essential to the success of the tea boycott. Women were able to create strong bonds with other women and work together for the purposes of boycotting goods. By doing this, they felt they were able to prove to men that they were capable of restraint. During the Townshend Acts, female patriots encouraged each other to “Stand firmly resolv’d, and bid *Grenville* to see, That rather than Freedom we part with our *Tea*, And well as we love the dear Draught when a-dry As American Patriots our Taste we deny –Pennsylvania’s gay Meadows can richly afford, To pamper our Fancy or furnish our Board.”<sup>78</sup> They were able to encourage each other to realize that freedom was more important than personal tea preferences. They would stick together and drink tea substitutes to prove their love of country. In another instance, the women of Boston joined together to sign a declaration stating their promise not to consume tea until the Townshend duties were repealed in order to save the “abused Country from Ruin and Slavery.” The next week their daughters resolved to follow in the same manner.<sup>79</sup> Slightly less than a month later the Townshend duties were repealed, but the duty on tea remained. Many women of Boston also convinced each other to drink thyme tea instead of British tea, thereby helping to ensure the success of the boycott.<sup>80</sup>

The inconsistency in boycotting also shows that it was difficult to surrender tea-drinking practices. Colonists believed that non-consumption was temporary and would end as soon as the colonies were granted fair representation. Once they were to be granted the liberty to make their own decisions about taxes, tea drinking and consumer behavior would resume. Therefore, each time a tax was repealed, colonists returned to their former state of tea-drinking. Once they began

---

<sup>78</sup> *Pennsylvania Chronicle*, 18 January 1769, in Early American Newspapers.

<sup>79</sup> *Boston Gazette*, 12, 19 February 1770, in Early American Newspapers.

<sup>80</sup> *Boston Gazette*, 26 February, 1770, in Early American Newspapers.

to realize that their liberties were still in danger, however, they would recommence non-consumption. This pattern is very clear in tea-purchase records. Tea simply could not be expended forever. After the repeal of the Townshend duties, some consumers thought it was okay to return to the consumption of tea. Political solidarity began to disappear.<sup>81</sup> However, when the Tea Act of 1773 was passed, the boycott reached new heights as colonists drew on a past connection of boycotting.<sup>82</sup> Each time their liberty appeared further threatened, the American colonists readied themselves for a new wave of boycotting. By preparing themselves for daily life without tea, they were really preparing themselves for a loss of their own British heritage and traditions. This difficulty of boycotting tea continued until the predicament of taxation without representation could no longer be tolerated. The boycott alone was not strong enough to convince Great Britain, and military force entered the scene. Colonial Americans had experienced a long journey of oppression and taxation which finally resulted in the outbreak of battle. This entire progression of events, complete with difficult struggle, can be understood through the story of tea.

#### Conclusion: Tea as a Lens to View Colonial American Social Change

Cynthia, in “An Elegy,” exemplifies the consensus of colonists who lamented over having to part with tea during the period of 1765-1775. “Like dearest friends” they separated from one another. No longer would they have tea to cheer them. No longer would their rooms be filled with the splendor of tea gaiety. No longer would they have an excuse to gather and share the latest gossip. In fact, they felt as if tea were stripped away from them forever. Yet, purging

---

<sup>81</sup> Breen, *Marketplace of Revolution*, 289-290.

<sup>82</sup> Breen, *Marketplace of Revolution*, 298.

their lives of tea-drinking and traditions did not involve leaving and never looking back. While some had never thought tea was worthwhile in the first place, most colonists had consumed tea daily until it acquired its' political status. The growing popularity of participating in the consumer marketplace and the democratization of tea had made it readily available to colonists from poorer backgrounds to the very affluent. All colonists could aspire to appear respectable and act like their British counterparts through the practice of drinking tea. The wide availability and use of tea had Anglicized the American colonies. There was no doubt that they were wedded to Great Britain. Therefore, with the tea boycott, a piece of this British identity was being surrendered. Tea was a part of their social culture, but it had become a symbol for slavery and oppression. This struggle to part with tea is a lens to view the American struggle to part with Great Britain. The colonists had never originally been interested in parting with the Mother Country, but merely longed for the liberty to make their own taxing decisions and to have a voice in Parliament. Over time it grew clearer that this hope could only be actualized through independence. Creating a new "American" culture, rather than a "British" one, was no easy feat, just as surrendering tea culture was a difficult process. Colonists continued to return to drinking tea, and then pulled away through boycotting. They had to continually work together to convince one another of the importance of their goal. T.H. Breen emphasizes that "tea was not enough to mobilize a nation. Transforming an imagined state into an actual one required a greater sacrifice from American consumers than forgoing their favorite beverage."<sup>83</sup> Breen is right. Tea could never claim full responsibility for bringing the American colonies together. But it did provide a very clear picture of the journey they were taking together. This is precisely why the social culture surrounding tea and the struggle of the colonists to shed themselves of this particular

---

<sup>83</sup> Breen, *Marketplace of Revolution*, 317.

beverage is a lens through which to view the shift from Anglicized colonies to a completely new nation in the years between 1765 and 1775.